The CONFEDERATE AIR FORCE

A simulated air raid so real it may have you running for cover is just a part of the dramatic "granddaddy of all air shows" which will re-create the terrors and excitement of World War II for thrilled air aficionados this Fall. The scene will be at the headquarters of the Confederate Air Force — Rebel Field at Harlingen in the heart of Texas' Rio Grande Valley.

The occasion is "Air Sho '83" which, in addition to the Pearl Harbor re-enactment, features dogfights, "tank-busting," thundering formations of heavy bombers and even parachute drops by both the famed "82nd Airborne," and "German" paratroops such as stormed Crete in WW II.

IT'S ALL REAL

Except for the pyrotechnics, nothing is make-believe. All the aircraft are authentic World War II versions — and so are many of the pilots and crews who put on the show every October.

A flying museum of more than 125 vintage warplanes — including the famed P-51 Mustang, P-40 "Flying Tiger", Navy Wildcat, RAF Spitfire and German ME-109 plus B-17s, B-24s, B-25s, A-26s and the world's only flying B-29 Superfortress — the aircraft of the CAF's "Ghost Squadron" represent a priceless collection saved from junk-heaps around the world.

The planes based at Harlingen are a major portion of the mere handfull which remain from the more than 300,000 aircraft built by yeoman efforts of American industry during some four years of war production.

STARTED IN 1957

The Confederate Air Force got its start in 1957 when five Air Corps veterans decided to once again feel the power and performance of a high-speed, propeller-driven fighter — the North American P-51 Mustang. In fun, someone painted "Confederate Air Force" on the fuselage; then the men began calling each other "Colonel," thus beginning the CAF image. After acquiring several more aircraft, the "Colonels" discovered that no-one — not even the government — was attempting to save even one of these historic warbirds which won the skies over every battlefront of the War.

In over 25 years of operation, CAF membership has swelled to nearly 7,000, and close to seventy support organizations, called "Wings," "Squadrons," "Flights," and "Detachments," across the nation and in several foreign countries. These dedicated men (and some women) not only donate money and solicit funds to buy the venerable planes, but also give time and skills to the difficult work of restoration.

CAF Executive Director, Mack Sterling, explains that "the CAF's stock-in-trade is nostalgia, patriotism and living American history that you can see, hear, touch and smell."

Fighters of the "Ghost Squadron" at rest in the CAF's Fighter Wing Hangar.

"Tora, Tora, Tora!" — a wave of Japanese planes swoops in for low-level attack.

Messerschmitt BF109, P-51 "Mustang" and P-38 "Lightning" over CAF headquarters.

— WHERE HISTORY LIVES

by Walter Preston

"Comin' at ya!" — a P-51 "Mustang" bores in.

A flight of P-40 "Flying Tigers" over Rebel Field.

Dressed in their CAF uniforms — and in some cases, their old Marine, Navy and Air Corps uniforms — the Confederate Air Force "Colonels" do their best to remind the American public of the need for a strong national defense.

The nostalgia, camaraderie and individual conservatism shared by members of the CAF is a predominant force in the growth of the organization. "To see a man walk up to one of our aircraft, see his lips quiver and a tear come to his eye is all the payment we need for the labor of love that we do," says an anonymous member.

NOT ALL JUST NOSTALGIA

But the CAF is not all nostalgia, pageantry and grandfathers struggling to fit into their WW II uniforms — it's hard and serious work of historical restoration and publicizing the need for national preparedness. Among the many notables who have been supporting members of the Confederate Air Force are: Vice-president George Bush; Senator Barry Goldwater, Sr.; General Curtis LeMay (USAF Ret.); Major General Paul Tibbets (USAF Ret.); astronaut Joe Engle; Major Joe Foss (USMC Ret.); former Texas Governer Bill Clements; the late Sir Douglas Bader, RAF; the late Lord Louis Mountbatten; and the late Vice-admiral Paul Ramsey (USN Ret.).

The CAF was the recipient of the Governor's Award for Tourism for the state of Texas in 1982 — a year in which some 150,000 people visited the Rebel Field air museum. The CAF, which sends some of its aircraft on fund-raising tours around the country, is a totally self-supporting, privately financed organization. It is all-volunteer, non-profit, tax-exempt and incorporated under the laws of the State of Texas for charitable and educational purposes. No state or federal grants are received.

"AIR SHO" SCHEDULE

The CAF's "Air Sho '83" is scheduled for October 6, 7, 8 and 9, and will feature, in addition to all the excitement mentioned earlier, a special performance by the U.S. Air Force's famous "Thunderbirds" precision aerobatic team on Sunday (the 9th).

LENS-land aviation buffs who may wish to witness this spectacular air power demonstration can contact the Confederate Air Force directly at P.O. Box CAF, Harlingen, TX 78551.

Hotel accommodations in the area may be obtained through the Valley Chamber of Commerce by phoning (512) 968-3141.

Over 120,000 people are expected to attend this year's event.